

## **From Dysfunction to Strength: Growth and Vitality at St. Luke's, Montclair, New Jersey**

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A century ago, St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Montclair, New Jersey, was a thriving, affluent church in an exurban town where residents commuted each day into New York City and came back to large, neat homes in a comfortable tree-lined setting. And while Montclair still has some suburban characteristics in that residents still commute to the City, St. Luke's and Montclair are now more than 150 years old. The large stone building was constructed in 1889. Forty years later in 1929 when the church was doing very well—just before the stock market crash—a large educational wing was added and the interior of the sanctuary was renovated by retrofitting it with a gothic Nave, complete with soaring columns within the Victorian superstructure.

Since 1929 the church had its ups and downs, but as late as 1991 St. Luke's was still one of the largest parishes in the diocese, with more than 1,400 members and an average worship attendance of 262. Yet with fewer than one in five members attending on an average Sunday, the membership roll was obviously inflated, and became even more so during the next three years as the membership continued to grow while attendance declined. There was a massive cleaning of the rolls in 1995 when membership dropped by more than 1,000. The slow decline in attendance continued until 1999, when it stabilized for four years, before starting to decline again in 2003—reaching a low point in 2006 with only 98 people in average Sunday worship attendance. With so few people attending and contributing, the church found it necessary to spend part of its endowment to make ends meet. The Diocese of Newark warned church leaders that if things continued as they were, the parish would be closed within five years.

But things did change. Average Sunday attendance grew each year for the next five years, from the low point of 98 in 2006 to 219 in 2012—an increase of 123 percent. And whereas attendance is not yet as high as it was in the early 1990s, this is a growing, revitalized congregation. How did St. Luke's go from a congregation in danger of closing to the fastest growing and one of the most vital congregations in the diocese? That is the question to be addressed here. And the answer is important because the Episcopal Church has many older, declining congregations that are trying to maintain large, costly facilities with limited resources and inadequate staff.

Congregational turnarounds are unusual and particularly difficult when a congregation is seriously declining, rather than slowly ebbing. If serious decline continues, the congregation will most often close—particularly a congregation with large facilities and high overhead cost. Studies of congregational turnarounds suggest that growth either occurs very rapidly after a change in leadership or takes at least five years of change to reset the system. In this case, St. Luke's did not have five years to work with. It probably was their last chance. But the congregation began to grow almost immediately after a new rector was called toward the end of 2006, when attendance was at its lowest. Still, even with the remarkable growth, a member of the vestry remarked that the situation still “feels precarious to me!” because the church continues to run a deficit, although much less than in the recent

past. Without such a rapid change from decline to growth, it is doubtful that the church would be feeling precarious at all in 2013. It would be up for sale.

### Bad Things Happen to Good Churches

To understand how St. Luke's has "grown out of the ashes," it is necessary to understand how it landed in such a precarious situation. Listening to lay leaders and longtime members, it clearly did not have to be this way. The congregation has a remarkably large number of people who stayed and some who even joined during the difficult times, because even when bad things were happening, the congregation retained certain characteristics that made staying worth it to members. It was, and is, an open, accepting, nurturing environment that is socially and racially diverse and very committed to loving, caring social ministry and outreach. But bad things did happen, and the church suffered.

The story of the slide into decline begins at a high point in the life of St. Luke's. Nick Cooke was the rector, having been called in 1988. By all accounts Nick was a good fit for the parish. He was an engaging priest who remembered names and drew people in. Despite the imposing worship space and largely upper-middle class constituency, the parish was always a very open place that was loving and accepting of newcomers. And it was racially diverse. According to one long-term member, "It was just very friendly, very open — just a loving parish. And it made you feel like you wanted to be part of the St. Luke's family. Everybody feels like you're a family here. That's what was so wonderful about it." People were drawn in and soon they were asked, "What can you do? What would you like to do?" Being on a first-name basis with current members came quickly for newcomers and the level of familiarity, welcoming and warmth was modeled by the rector.

A warm welcome and nearly immediate acceptance, along with the assumption that new people wanted to actively participate, led to early involvement in a variety of ministries and functions on the part of most new attendees. According to one man, "At the coffee hour I was immediately surrounded by now-friends, and it was quickly discovered that I could sing. It was a given at that point that I would be part of the choir and I actually have been ever since." He went on to say that he has since served on the vestry and search committee and is currently on the building and grounds committee and head of the flower guild. Other stories were similar; only the area of work or ministry was different. One now-member began by helping with the pancake supper; another in the thrift shop; still another in the large food ministry that the church runs each week. The points of entry were different, but involvement came quickly and easily, and usually developed into additional levels of involvement. Relative newcomers found themselves on key committees, and even the vestry, much more quickly than is the norm in most Episcopal churches.

Despite the strength of the congregation and a good relationship with the rector, the parish had reached a statistical plateau and was seeing its attendance drop off a bit in the early 1990s. The problems were most likely demographic and also because of the familial nature of the congregation. Montclair is an older suburb, and for many years the population of the area has shown little increase. New families move in to replace retiring empty nesters from time to time, but overall the population was essentially stable during the 1990s, with some actual decline in the 2000s. Also, the familial nature

of the church, supported by a very engaged rector, created what was essentially an overly large pastor-centered church. It was dependent on being a large, interconnected family.

Between 1991 and 1994 average worship attendance declined from 262 to 197, but membership continued to rise each year, increasing from 1,443 to 1,502. So it remained a fairly strong congregation in the diocese. Then in January 1995 disaster struck. Nick Cooke left St. Luke's to be rector of another church in Virginia and his wife, who had been an active member of St. Luke's, was accused of embezzling more than \$2 million dollars from the Episcopal Church. Ellen Cooke was treasurer of the Episcopal Church at the Church Center in New York City until she was forced out in December 1994. Financial irregularities in her transition led to disclosures of systematic fraud and eventually to her arrest, trial and imprisonment. Unfortunately, Nick Cooke and his disgraced wife were still seen as connected to St. Luke's rather than to his new parish. It was also discovered that Ellen had transferred nearly \$100,000 to a discretionary fund at St. Luke's, a fund that was controlled by her husband. This finding, the subsequent investigation by the diocese, and the lavish lifestyle led by the Cooke's in Montclair created a sense of guilt by association on the part of the church. According to one member, things were going pretty well while Nick Cooke was in charge, but, "We didn't know the national church was footing the bill."

The effect of the scandal on the identity of St. Luke's was devastating and long-lasting: Members referred to St. Luke's as "a basket-case congregation" and "a troubled congregation with big money problems." Despite the fact that Nick was no longer rector when his wife was arrested, St. Luke's was identified locally and in the greater New York region as where the scandal had happened, complete with a front-page story in the New York Times that featured a picture of members sitting in the pews. Many people left and parishioners described the diocese as "not very helpful" in the process.

The mythology that continues in the church is that attendance was cut in half during the scandal, but that is not really true. During the two years of an interim rector, attendance declined from 197 to 146. Still, the membership rolls were purged by two thirds. The "core" membership also dropped, but not as greatly as many believed.

The long-term members thought that the interim rector who followed Nick Cooke helped heal some of the wounds and restore confidence within the congregation. They wanted him to continue, but the diocese pressed the church to call a permanent rector. The person called was not a good fit according to long-term members, but at the end of the search "it was him or nobody," and rather than begin a new search, he was called to be the rector. The congregation loved the new rector's wife, but the new rector not so much. "She made him palatable," but he was never a part of the family. Apparently, part of the problem was that the new rector did not really warm up to children, and the worship services developed "a certain stuffiness" which made parents of young children uncomfortable. "He was not child friendly," said one member, a comment that provoked another member to say, "He wasn't people friendly." The warm, familial nature of the church, which was a major part of its identity, began to erode, and even the stability provided by a permanent rector could not prevent an eventual decline in attendance. "People ran hot and cold with him; he drove a lot of people away."

When that rector left after around seven years, more clergy problems developed. An interim priest was “shoved down our throats” by the diocese, according to one lay leader. She was described by others as “a piece of work” and as having “a lot of problems.” Her brief tenure before being fired was called “hell” and “an absolute disaster.” Lack of warmth was apparently combined with a dictatorial style, which members felt was a particularly galling approach for an interim. A “sub-vestry” began meeting informally after the real vestry meeting to allow lay leaders to vent about what had happened. Finally, after “a total meltdown in the pulpit,” the interim left briefly for rehab. Upon return, she was unable to resume her duties as priest and was eventually fired.

A new interim was called and he helped the congregation and its leaders heal. “He was very calm and was a great churchman,” said one member. Another said, “We didn’t experience extraordinary growth during that time, but he kept the lights on.” Unfortunately, he also failed to endear himself to parents with young children and the demographics of active membership continued to rise in age. By the end of his tenure attendance dropped to its lowest level: 98.

The congregation was ready for a new chapter in the life of St. Luke’s. That began when John Mennell was called as rector in late 2006.

### You Grow from Where You Are

St. Luke’s began to grow almost immediately after John arrived and has grown every year since. The rate of increase is impressive, and it has been steady. The growth is not based on the new rector’s preaching ability or personal charisma. He has gifts, to be sure, but he is not really a charismatic leader. As with many declining or plateaued congregations that have experienced conflict, and particularly conflict over leadership, the ending of conflict and new positive leadership often results in a growth of a “pent-up” kind. Longer-term members who had lapsed in their attendance return to the congregation. People begin to talk about the congregation with their friends. Visitors detect a congregation with a spirit of optimism. Attendance increases and the optimistic spirit continues to rise.

Going through difficult times and reaching a point where there is nowhere to go but up creates a great opportunity for a new leader who does not have to follow a beloved priest that could do no wrong (at least in retrospect). The long-term members of St. Luke’s were desperate for a change, according to John. They had survived the hard times and were not going to leave, but having experienced better times and knowing the strengths of the congregation, they believed that things could change for the good.

John is a second-career priest, having spent 15 years with Procter & Gamble. A high-energy extrovert, John began working after college in customer service at corporate headquarters in Cincinnati, Ohio. He soon moved to corporate finance, even though he lacked an accounting background. John’s gift was in translating the finances to executives who were not numbers people. However, his most rewarding work with Procter & Gamble was in strategic planning, which he views as a prophetic endeavor in that you are taking what exists as an organization and trying to look beyond it, projecting out and moving toward a new reality. It was experience that was well suited to leading a congregation,

which, after all, is also an organization. And in the case of St. Luke's it was an organization in dire need of imagining a better future.

John resisted his call to the priesthood. He was baptized in the Catholic Church while a student at Notre Dame, having gone through the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA) led by an unusually open, broadminded priest. Unfortunately, later, the Roman Catholic parish priest John and his non-Catholic fiancé contacted about getting married was anything but open and broadminded. They found a better welcome in an Episcopal parish in Cincinnati, were married there and became members. John got totally involved, "doing everything there was to do." His movement from parishioner to priest began slowly, starting with his desire to always sit in the front row during worship, picturing himself leading. He imagined he might even be called up to preach spontaneously if something "happened" to the rector. But the actual call came when John was invited, or was sort of coerced, into attending a silent men's retreat—an event that did not fit his extroverted, non-contemplative nature. Yet in meditation John began to hear the word "priest," which led to an internal argument about why becoming a priest was impractical. Efforts to have others talk him out of "this crap" were unsuccessful. Friends *could* see John as a priest even if he could not at the time. Eventually, John accepted what he came to understand as a call, took an early exit opportunity from Procter & Gamble and went to seminary in New York. It was a step of faith to give up a high-paying job with young children in the home.

John did his seminary internship at a fairly large, historic parish on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, and stayed on there as an assistant after graduation and ordination to the priesthood. Yet only six months after becoming a priest, John applied to be rector at St. Luke's in Montclair, New Jersey. Thinking that it was a pretty small parish with an average Sunday worship attendance of less than 100, he reasoned, "It's not that big; I could do that." He was surprised to find out, later, that the old guard in the church remembered it as one of the cardinal parishes of the Diocese of Newark. So he did not know, at least initially, what he was getting himself into.

So why did St. Luke's call a largely untested priest in his first rectorship out of more than 40 other candidates? Essentially because they knew what they wanted—having gone through a deep listening process during the interim period—and John had those characteristics. The congregation would certainly not have called a rector in his or her 20s right out of seminary. But while still young, John was not untested with regard to working in organizations. His corporate background gave him an understanding of organizational dynamics and finances. One member of the search committee noted that his business background was important. "The fact that he had worked in finance was really appealing. And he obviously wasn't afraid of our \$200,000 deficit. That didn't send him running." Added to this was John's energy and ability to see what the congregation could become. According to one member of the search committee, "One of the things we were looking for was someone with a lot of energy, and John has a huge amount of energy. In fact, sometimes you have to suppress him a little bit."

In addition to energy and financial grounding, the congregation wanted someone who could work with a diverse congregation, promote youth programs and cultivate their outreach efforts. That is what John wanted to do. The fit was good. According to the head of the search committee, "You're not

looking for a super priest, you're looking for someone who fits what your needs are . . . He was the one, he fulfilled our goals; he's the right priest for us."

Feeling "beaten down" after years of conflict and "headless," the congregation of St. Luke's wanted and needed leadership that would help move them in the direction that they wanted to go. Unlike some older parishes that are enamored with their past and cannot move forward, St. Luke's wanted to start moving again. Despite the conflict of the past, this was not a conflicted congregation. It was a strong, if diminished, congregation that thought it could have a bright future. It wanted to get back to being what it always had been.

### A New Beginning

St. Luke's has a strong sense of community. Unlike many congregations, it accepts new people remarkably easily, and, as such, has the potential for growth in an environment where families are moving in on a regular basis. Yet internal conflict makes even a strong community unattractive. So even though most long-term committed members may stay, some necessarily move away from the area or stop attending if they have a low tolerance for conflict, and visitors are unlikely to join. A further defining characteristic of this congregation as a community is a sense of warmth and enjoying themselves. Being somber doesn't really fit and undermines the congregation's community spirit. So even in the absence of overt conflict, the community suffered with leadership that did not model the congregation's own sense of warmth and acceptance. This was not a place for stilted, formal worship where people are expected to take their liturgical medicine, along with bed rest in the pews. Whatever energy there was tended to evaporate; and whatever community existed turned inward.

The new rector brought a different spirit to worship and congregational life that was in keeping with the culture of this congregation. Worship became more joyful and even somewhat spontaneous. The prior "stiffness" was gone and the congregation also became more open to children—moving from "toleration to treasure" in the words of one vestry member. John models this acceptance and welcome, and he knows everyone's name.

The church began to grow because some people who had left (but not left), came back to active involvement. Then there were new people who visited and found a remarkable welcome. Because the area has young families, the acceptance of children made a big difference. Children came with their parents.

With even a modest level of increase, the sense that the church was dying or "a basket case" was replaced by an infectious sense of optimism. This sense of optimism was modeled in celebrative worship.

### Overcoming Themselves and Low-Hanging Fruit

The church had a new sense of optimism and a friendly, energetic rector who led worship with a sense of joy and acceptance. Would that be enough to sustain the growth in worship and build a strong, vibrant congregation? The answer is probably not, unless the rector had greater personal

charisma and could attract people by the force of his personality. This sometimes happens, but it did not happen here. John is not a leader who attracts followers. There are no starry-eyed John Mennell worshipers at St. Luke's. Rather, the congregation is being reformed and reorganized with new and revitalized programs, a renewed purpose, and an infectious spirit. To be sure, John helps provide some of the energy, but energy and enthusiasm are not enough to transform a dying congregation. They may be enough to shake members out of lethargy and renew a sense of optimism and possibilities, but they are not enough to keep a congregation on the path to renewal.

Unlike many declining congregations, St. Luke's had a lot of strengths. Most of these were underutilized in terms of actually helping the congregation grow and thrive, but nevertheless, they were there. And some of what could be strengths had become weaknesses.

Physical Plant and Sanctuary. Even though St. Luke's is located in a residential area, it is on a well-traveled street close to the center of Montclair. The church is quite visible, and although somewhat somber looking, efforts have been made to make it seem more inviting with banners and a new wooden sign. Also adding a sense of life and welcome is the rector greeting people at the door of the church each Sunday.

The Victorian, now neo-gothic, architecture is a bit odd, but inside the Nave there is a great deal of space. The soaring heights and stone columns add an old-world atmosphere that is conducive to a liturgical form of worship. The columns also create divisions of the space, which allows the church to "house" a chapel of sorts just off to the left side for its 9:00 a.m. "Celebrate!" service, which is attended by younger children and led by the rector. The internal "rooms" also provide space for children to gather and do artwork in the Nave during the primary worship service, within sight of protective parents, but without the noise and fidgeting that can come with having young children attend worship.

In addition to the Nave there is a very large, multi-story educational wing that houses the church school, a chapel, offices, choir rooms, a kitchen, various outreach ministries, various tenants, and a huge assembly hall. The educational wing was built in 1929 when the Nave was being de-Victorianized. The benefit of so much space is a plethora of activities and also some rental income. The downside of so much space is upkeep, high utility bills and lack of purpose for much of it. In 2011, the church was hit by one of the biggest downsides of an old facility—the heating system failed. At about the same time, the city of Montclair told the church they needed to get a new alarm system. In the old days a millionaire or two might bear most of the cost, but today the additional costs must be shared by everyone. The rector had no heat in his office for several months and as of February 2012, the assembly hall still had no heat. Luckily, it was a mild winter in 2011-2012. Deferred maintenance, renovation and fixing problems might easily add several hundred thousand dollars to church expenses within the next few years.

Still, there is space for nearly everything the congregation might want to do. Because of the lack of heat in the lovely old assembly hall (which looks like a Victorian temperance hall), the coffee fellowship after worship had to be held in the almost-as-large fellowship area where the thrice-weekly feeding ministry and kitchen are located. There is also a huge rectory next door to the church with room to spare for meetings, parties and large sit-down dinners.

Community Outreach. St. Luke's has long been known for its involvement in outreach ministries. However, over the years the relationship of the ministries to the congregation became more and more distant, so that the church essentially housed the ministries rather than being directly involved in the day-to-day activities. So while the ministries themselves might be seen as strengths of the church, the relative lack of member involvement meant that they were not really ministries *of* the congregation. As such, the outreach ministries did not provide a way for members to express their faith in a tangible way, nor did the ministries foster relationships among members who might participate together.

In recent years, the church has moved from passive housing and oversight to actual involvement in its ministries. One of the key ministries that became more integral to the church is Toni's Kitchen, a feeding ministry that is in its 30<sup>th</sup> year at St. Luke's. It provides up to 70 meals a day on Thursday, Friday and Saturday at lunchtime, and dinner on Sunday for a variety of people, including the homeless, senior citizens with limited incomes who need a good meal, and the working poor. It is a soup kitchen with the motto, "It's more than just soup"—meaning it really is a meal and "guests," as the diners are called, are welcomed with warm hospitality and respect. There is no screening for income or need.

The involvement of the congregation in outreach even extends to children. In vacation Bible school children decorated placemats for Toni's Kitchen. Other children were involved in Kids in the Kitchen, helping in the soup kitchen and making "manna bags" with snacks and water bottles for the guests. For privileged children it is a helpful exercise to be handling all kinds of goodies and to know that "they are not for you."

Welcoming Spirit. Not all churches are truly welcoming. Most are welcoming to their own—to members who already know one another—but it is rare and apparently somewhat difficult for most churches to welcome the stranger. St. Luke's is different.

The current Senior Warden began attending the church a little over 10 years ago when she was newly single. On her first visit, while sitting in a pew toward the back, the church cat at that time, named Mercury, came in the church, walked around Martha's feet a few times and then strolled back out the door. She thought, "That's it! If the cat could be here, I could be here." A picture of the current church cat, Tiger, is on the church website's staff directory, resplendent in her own clerical collar. Like Mercury, Tiger comes and goes as she pleases, including attending committee and vestry meetings. This is not to say that having a church cat is one of the secrets to congregational vitality, but it does speak to the atmosphere of easy acceptance and openness.

The welcome begins with the rector on the front steps of the church greeting people as they arrive. It continues with the greetings seen among members and visitors as people find their seats and when people pass the peace during the liturgy. The level of attention, particularly to visitors, is not as overwhelming as it might be in a church that is desperate for new members, but it seems genuine. And it is repeated.

Members and attendees are invited to come to the "coffee hour" after the main worship service, and newcomers join the parade through a circuitous maze of steps and pathways that only an old church could create. At the coffee hour there are tables for sitting on either side of a central



corridor of other tables filled with an amazing assortment of food. We are not just talking about muffins and other pastries, but freshly cut ham on biscuits, onion quiche, freshly baked brownies and so forth. It is a spread. It is also a bit chaotic as adults mill around and children dash in and out, grabbing goodies. Because the fare is so substantial and varied, people fill plates and gather at crowded tables to sit down and eat. Newcomers are quickly identified by members, welcomed and engaged in conversation. This is not the typical stilted coffee hour where people stand around and talk only to their friends and leave after a few minutes.

The role of the coffee hour in welcoming people, engaging newcomers, and providing a setting for fellowship and engagement is recognized by leaders and staff of the congregation. Meetings and study groups are often held after worship, but only after members go to coffee hour. The time is “sacrosanct” according to the rector. A table in the coffee hour area may include a member of the vestry, a couple of newer members and someone who is visiting for the first time. Newcomers do not find themselves abandoned because there are enough people watching out for visitors and people who are not connected to others. So instead of losing most people who visit and never return, newcomers are fed well and engaged in conversation. Stories abound of people who wandered in, found a remarkable welcome, became involved in one group or another and became active members—some for the first times in their lives. All of this does not happen by chance.

Although the congregation has long been welcoming, it is one thing to receive a hearty greeting in the worship service. It is quite another to be engaged in meaningful conversation and welcomed to return. St. Luke’s has capitalized on one of their strengths—being welcoming—and transformed it through the coffee hour as a way into the community. There are organized coffee hour teams that compete to provide the best food. They are also there to identify the visitors and actually talk to them. This is where people get to know one another and where connections are made for further involvement. It is an avenue into this church community, but one that actually repels people in many congregations. Rather than modeling openness and community, coffee hours typically model barriers and cliques.

Church School and Children. It would have been easy for a mainline church in a city like Montclair to give scant attention to children, youth and church school. This is not a growing suburb, populated with lots of young families, and there were once relatively few young children in the church. Further, a more liturgical form of worship is frequently not appreciative of, or engaging to, young children. The membership of St. Luke’s was both older and aging, even though the church had been able to retain a larger than expected youth group. But the leadership of St. Luke’s was not satisfied with following the path of least resistance, nor did they accept the inevitable fate of growing progressively older in membership. They wanted life and life meant children, youth, young adults *and* older adults. Adding other generations might help “save the church,” but the impetus for reaching families with children was not to keep the church from closing—it was to restore something key to the identity of the congregation. No one wanted the church to be a museum hall; they wanted it to be a family room. The leaders also believed that the church could become child friendly again and that in (almost) any community there are families to be reached—not just in newer suburbs.

Calling John Mennell as rector was the beginning of the process of change and of capitalizing on what could become a congregational strength. This was an open, accepting community, but it needed to be more open and accepting of young families (of all types). John helped model this acceptance and engagement of children during worship, in one-on-one interaction, in activities and in programming. He brought energy and a passion for children to a church that was eager to become a congregation with those characteristics.

But passion and energy are not enough to actually change the direction of a congregation. There must be substance and there must be process: the substance is provided by a reorganized and revitalized church school, and the process is one that creates paths into active participation and formation. As with much of what happens at St. Luke's, it is not typical.

Kathy DeWalt is director of family ministries and has helped change the orientation of church school through developmentally appropriate age-graded "classes," and by connecting with parents who entrust their children in a spiritually and temporally safe environment. Prior to John coming as rector, Kathy was a volunteer and worked primarily with teens. In keeping with the ethos of enjoyment, acceptance and inclusion, part of what the youth group did was have parties—big events that were both fun and meaningful for teens. Anyone could come, whether they were church members or not.

Although families with children are a much smaller demographic today than they were during previous decades, they do exist in most urban and suburban areas and they typically visit churches. Young families do not necessarily "come back" to churches after spending years away while single or in college or while they were married without children, but most do make an effort, if somewhat tentatively, to "expose" their children to the church. Their motives are various, but there remains a sense that children need a moral, religious education and would benefit from church involvement.

So if younger families are in an area—and they are in Montclair—churches get visited by them. But more often than not, visits do not turn into active involvement. Typically, the congregation is not particularly welcoming, children are looked upon as somewhat disruptive, church school/Sunday school isn't working very well, or there isn't any thought or effort given to transitioning visitors with children into participants with children (and then into members with kids). None of these barriers exist at St. Luke's—by design and by evolution as the church school grew. By welcoming children and preparing a place for them, parents have become involved too. St. Luke's grows largely by reaching families with children, which is a rarity among urban mainline churches.

The rector and the leadership of St. Luke's realized that when parents come to the church with children, they must be engaged. Kathy DeWalt is the key person for that. She talks to the parents, answers their questions and shows them around. Young families cannot be expected to show up and blissfully drop off their children (particularly in urban areas), trusting that they will be safe and will learn anything meaningful. They also do not want to take their children to something that their kids will hate and complain about attending. For every parent who attends church for the sake of their children is another parent who does not attend because they don't want to get up in the morning and drag a

complaining child to church. So along with the welcome, the answering of questions, there must be attention to the space, the content, and developmentally appropriate activities.

In the case of St Luke's the church school floor of the education wing was renovated and made child friendly. According to Kathy, "We were going to make the space look like kids were important and that this (space) was theirs." The colors are bright and new, and there are no tables and chairs. There's nothing that looks like school in any of our Sunday school groups. That is very deliberate. "Kids don't want another day of classes; kids are already horribly programmed."

For example, *Godly Play* is adapted and used for younger children, but when children get into the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> grade, they may be too old for stories but not old enough to talk easily in a group setting. So they have a Bible "computer lab" in which children play Sunday school computer games. After about two years the kids are ready to talk and move to another church school "classroom" that engages them in a different way. Sunday morning church school continues through middle school. High school students have church school after worship and the coffee hour feast, and during the regular Sunday school period they can either help teach Sunday school for younger children or attend the worship service.

Many of the teens had been involved in the senior choir prior to the renewed growth of the congregation. The addition of more young children led to a revival of a junior choir for 2<sup>nd</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> graders. As with all of the programs of church, this one was well thought through. They do supper first from 6:00 to 6:30, which allows the kids to talk to their friends, then choir lasts until 7:15 when their parents can pick them up. Food is important, fellowship is important, as is the "religious" activity in which the children are involved.

For the very young children, who would ordinarily go to the nursery or one of the youngest Sunday school classes, the 9 a.m. "Celebrate!" service provides a way for protective parents to not only keep their children during worship, but to also participate in a relatively brief service that fully engages their kids. Since the children actually help conduct the service (including bringing the elements to the table and lighting the candles), and since it includes lots of physical activity, singing, clapping and jumping around, boredom is not an issue. Each part of the service lasts no more than five minutes with multiple changes of position. Further, nursery caregivers and the church school director both attend "Celebrate!," which allows parents to develop a sense of trust and frequently helps transition children into church school and parents into the regular worship service. In terms of participants, the service is not large, but the effect of the service is invaluable to helping form children through worship and connecting both children and parents to the parish community.

The process of engagement and incorporation in St. Luke's is one of the clear strengths of this congregation. Having children participate and feel like the entire congregation is their family is remarkable. But it is happening. As one mother put it, "My six-year-old thinks he owns this place."

Liturgy: Worship and Music. Worship at St. Luke's is described as "traditional," Rite II. And this is true with regard to the 8:00 said Eucharist (with no music) and the main 10:00 Eucharist with music. The 9:00 "Celebrate" for younger children and their parents is a different sort of service, but follows the same basic pattern as the two other services. Yet anyone who describes the worship at St. Luke's always adds that although the services are "traditional," they are not "stuffy." They are full of life and a little bit unpredictable.

The rector greets people as they enter the church through a large, old oak door. Members and visitors enter the Nave and take their seats in rows of traditional oak pews with a large center aisle. But because the church's interior resembles a (smallish) gothic cathedral, there is plenty of room on the sides of the pews for people to enter as they will, from the right or left. The congregation at worship is fairly diverse racially, even though it is a predominantly white congregation. About 15-20 percent of attendees are African American or black Caribbean. There is greater diversity by age. Even though church school is held during most of the 10:00 worship service, there are a number of young children attending with their parents, as well as a group of youth sitting together near the front. Most of the adults are in their 40s, 50s and 60s with some younger adults and elderly persons among the mix. There is a wide variety of dress. Some men are in suits with ties, but the majority are casually dressed. In the summer some people even attend church in shorts. Many of the members wear nametags.

If a sense of openness and warmth is seen in the greeting by the rector at the front and the welcome people receive when taking their seats, a sense of ritual and symbol is seen in the stately procession of the cross by a white robed Eucharistic minister, followed by the choir. The order of service is in large booklet form, easy to read and accessible on iPads and other electronic devices via Wi-Fi. Hymns and texts for reading are printed, so there is no shuffling of hymnals, Bibles and the Book of Common Prayer.

Although the service is Rite II and somewhat formal, it is not Anglo-Catholic in style. There is no incense, but there is kneeling. This is the more typical format in Episcopal congregations. But there is no rote quality to the service as there is in many congregations. Seriousness and attention is seen in the procession, and also in the manner in which the scripture lessons are read, with obvious practice and dramatic pausing. Readers are earnest, but not overly so. It is as though they are taking their task and the words very seriously. This adds a quality to the worship service that the liturgy is indeed the work of the people.

After the prelude hymn, opening acclamation, procession, Gloria, Collects, reading of the Psalm and the Scripture lessons, there is the sermon. The sermon is called a sermon here, rather than a homily, and it is a bit longer than the average homily and shows more structure and preparation than is the case in many churches which feature a brief homily. The sermon begins with a down to earth story, the story is connected to the scripture reading, and an application is made to the life of the hearer. The sermon is delivered somewhat conversationally—as if the priest was talking directly to each person—with a surprising amount of energy, inflection and enthusiasm. It contains humor, meaning and a "go forth" component. The sermons are not really efforts at provocation or teaching, but rather an accessible scripture-based message.

Clearly, a great deal of thought and preparation has gone into the sermon, which is more typical of evangelical churches and some Roman Catholic parishes than it is in many Episcopal churches. This attention to the work is seen throughout the service. But it is less about attention to the specific details than it is attention to the substance of what is being done. So worship is serious without coming across as stilted and bloodlessly “professional.”

Following the sermon, the Nicene Creed is recited with the text printed in the order of service. Then Prayers of the People are said, The Collect at the Prayers, the Confession and Absolution, and finally the passing of the Peace—to conclude the liturgy of the Word. With the passing of the Peace, the atmosphere of the church changes from worship to community. The passing of the peace is unusually enthusiastic for a mainline church. People go up and down the aisles, hugging, shaking hands, and saying the words of peace and greeting. It lasts for a surprisingly long time and is not at all quiet or perfunctory. People seem really happy to see one another and to wish each other the Peace of God. The passing of the Peace then transitions into the announcements, which in keeping with the culture of the church, are delivered in a playful, but informative manner. The Shrove Tuesday pancake supper is announced as the “cakes of skill.” An open vestry meeting is announced, along with the upcoming Evensong service.

Holy Communion begins with an offertory anthem, during which the gifts of the people are collected. The music for the anthem is quite varied from week to week and as with all of the music at St. Luke’s, is well done and accessible. One Sunday included an anthem featuring a well-known singer from The Metropolitan Opera. Another Sunday featured “Rock-a my Soul,” a lively spiritual sung by the choir. The director of music, Charles Hunter, has been at St. Luke’s for many years and has provided a continuity of excellent music with his choirs, even when other aspects of the church and its worship suffered.

The Eucharist is handled in the best Episcopal fashion, with both seriousness and enthusiasm. The communion hymns, sung as people came forward to take the elements, were surprising in several services. One was “Take my life and let it be,” and the other was “Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling.” Rather than the expected unmemorable hymns, these were melodic “memory bank” songs that were familiar to everyone. It was as if communion was serving both as the Eucharist and as an invitation to commitment.

The Eucharist is followed by a Post-Communion prayer, a Eucharistic Visitor prayer (showing again the attention to the community, whether present at the service or not), a blessing, another hymn and a very enthusiastic dismissal. The celebrant shouted: Let us go forth in the name of Christ! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! To which the congregation shouted back: Thanks be to God. Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

After worship people milled around, talked and wound their way to the exceptional coffee hour.

## Moving Into the Future

The renewal of St. Luke's, Montclair could be seen as unexpected. Even though the proximity to New York makes it somewhat unusual, the setting is not that different from thousands of large churches in older suburbs and older residential areas around the country. Although there is no new housing and the population is much more diverse than it once was, the people are still there. But churches in such areas necessarily deal with large, expensive facilities that can be seen as financial drains or as a potential resource. For St. Luke's, even though the expenses are high and there is a great deal of infrastructure to be renewed, the Nave, educational building and parish hall are amazing facilities that are being utilized to help restore the congregation to life and health.

After the problems the congregation experienced with clergy and clergy transitions, there is a new spirit. But that spirit was not something entirely new, it was already there, waiting to reemerge. Doing so required "resetting the system" and the new rector was instrumental in helping the congregation make this happen. This is what leadership can do if properly exercised.

The renewal of St. Luke's was aided greatly by a strong sense of community among the membership. This was not a truly conflicted congregation, but rather one that was somewhat oppressed by circumstance and inappropriate leadership. Good leadership helped provide direction for the congregation, nurtured the community and helped it expand. Key to this change was providing a place for children and their families and finding ways to connect with people and invite them into the fellowship.

The current direction of St. Luke's is one that should encourage further expansion of the community. However, there are limits to the extent that the congregation can operate on such a face-to-face basis. This can be seen in the ability of the rector to know the names of everyone and the birthdays of their children. It also can be seen in the workload of the Director of Formation. Although St. Luke's has managed to grow beyond the definition of a Pastor-centered congregation, the congregation is perhaps overly dependent on a small group of highly functioning people. The question is how the congregation can continue to grow without burning out its leadership or overly routinizing the processes that bring people in and make them a part of the community.

St. Luke's is a classic example of a congregation that is full of life. And any organization that is full of life is one that creates, but also manages, chaos. This can be seen in worship, which allows cats to attend and children to do artwork in a corner of a gothic Nave. It can be seen in the crazy events that the church sponsors. From Shrove Tuesday pancakes to "breakfast with the bunny" on Easter and other celebrations for adults, youth and children, there is an infectious quality that is somehow joyous and generative. Similarly, in church school, choir and especially in the coffee hour, people are drawn in and community forms through interaction. The interaction is purposeful in each setting, and the quality of the interaction is necessarily formative—both in terms of the community and the people who are taking part.

Can a formative, somewhat chaotic environment *continue* to be formative and somewhat chaotic? Happily, such an environment seems to fit the rector, and the crew of staff is also happy with

the current environment. The challenge is to keep the quality of the congregation as it grows larger, and also to deal with the need for controlling chaos when it necessarily arises. But it can be done and this congregation is constantly reevaluating its direction. Change is constant, and St. Luke's embraces people and change in a way that is quite unusual.

The primary lesson of St. Luke's is for a congregation to enhance their strengths and begin to move in a coherent direction. Forming or reforming a strong community with a clear purpose is also key. For congregations that are conflicted or in which people do not know each other, the challenges are great because they must first find a basis for community before they can begin to enhance it and invite others in. St. Luke's did not have to do this, and so it was able to move forward without the healing stage of congregational renewal. Other churches will find themselves in a similar position, although perhaps not as accepting of newcomers as was St. Luke's. When you begin with both community and openness, the process of renewal requires more of a sudden jolt than a long-term fix.